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REPORT OF THE SECRETARY-GENERAL CONCERNING THE SITUATION IN ABKHAZIA, GEORGIA

I. INTRODUCTION

1. The present report is submitted pursuant to the statement by the President of the Security Council of 28 May 1998 (S/PRST/1998/16), by which the members of the Council requested me to consult both sides in the Georgian/Abkhaz conflict on the concept of the self-protection unit outlined in my report of 11 May 1998 (S/1998/375, para. 26) and on other options as appropriate, in close cooperation with the group of Friends of the Secretary-General. The members of the Council also requested me to report on the outcome of those consultations as soon as possible and no later than 12 June 1998. In addition to the above, the report provides an update on recent developments in the region.

II. RECENT DEVELOPMENTS

2. Since my report of 11 May, the situation in the Gali sector has been deteriorating sharply. As the Council is aware, tensions had been building up for some time in that sector, and there was general apprehension in the population that a resumption of hostilities was imminent. A particular provocation that raised the tension level substantially was a one-day action staged by representatives of the Abkhaz Government-in-exile, which involved, among other activities, the raising of the Georgian flag in the Gali district. This event followed shortly the relocation of the headquarters of the Abkhaz Government-in-exile from Tbilisi to Zugdidi and the announcement by its leadership of its intention to create a "liberated zone" in the Gali district. Subsequently, on the night of 19-20 May, hostilities broke out in the security zone of the Gali sector between Abkhaz militia and Georgian armed groups. The Abkhaz side claimed that they were defending their territory against what they considered to be "Georgian terrorist groups", while the Georgians argued that they were defending the Georgian population against a sweep operation launched by the Abkhaz militia.

3. Following this outbreak of hostilities and the announcement by my Special Representative that an extraordinary session of the Coordinating Council would be convened on 22 May, the situation calmed down. However, while it was agreed

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during the meeting of the Council that steps would be taken to stop the armed confrontation, fighting again erupted on 23 May and continued the following day when the Abkhaz militia reportedly launched a large-scale operation. As hostilities escalated, thousands of inhabitants (most of whom had already fled their homes once before during the September 1993 war) fled the Gali district southwards across the Inguri River.

4. In light of these developments, the United Nations Observer Mission in Georgia (UNOMIG) offered to provide logistic support, including air and ground transportation, to facilitate an immediate face-to-face meeting between representatives of the Government of Georgia and the Abkhaz authorities. On 25 May, following efforts by both sides, a Protocol on a Ceasefire and Withdrawal of Armed Formations was signed at Gagra by the Government of Georgia and the Abkhaz authorities, as well as by my Special Representative and the Commander of the peacekeeping force of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). The Protocol stipulated, inter alia, that special monitoring groups composed of representatives of the parties, UNOMIG and the CIS peacekeeping force would be established to monitor the ceasefire. Bearing in mind the seriousness of the situation and the need for the United Nations to support the parties' efforts in restoring the ceasefire, my Special Representative decided to lift partially the freeze on the Mission's patrolling in order to enable UNOMIG to take part in the implementation of the Protocol.

5. On 27 May, the Abkhaz leader, Mr. Vladislav Ardzinba, decreed a state of emergency in the Gali sector. Among other provisions, the decree provides for reinforcing to full strength the Abkhaz militia of the Gali sector and supplementing them with the necessary arms and logistic resources; the introduction of a curfew; the creation of a military commandant structure; and the strict control of persons and traffic moving in and out of the sector. The decision, which has since taken effect, is being implemented by the "Ministry of the Interior" in the security zone and the "Ministry of Defence" in the restricted weapons zone. The proclamation of a state of emergency runs counter to the spirit of both the Agreement on a Ceasefire and Separation of Forces, signed in Moscow on 14 May 1994, and the Protocol of 25 May 1998.

6. It was widely reported during the recent hostilities that Abkhaz militia and other Abkhaz armed groups had engaged in looting and burning of houses. Such activities are estimated to have resulted in the destruction of up to 90 per cent of the houses in some villages of the Gali district. Information available to date indicates that some 30,000 inhabitants of the sector have been displaced as a result of the hostilities. Many of these will not be able to return to their homes any time soon as a result of practices and policies of the Abkhaz authorities, which include, inter alia, a special regime for the entry of people into Abkhazia, charging of a 10-rouble fee for crossing the Inguri River and obstructing the passage of those who have Georgian residence identification in their passports.

7. On 29 May, it appeared that the parties had begun to disengage and that the situation was calming down. However, by 31 May, the situation had again become critical, and my Special Representative assessed that the risk of renewed hostilities was real. Preparations by both sides for renewed conflict were apparently under way. While the Abkhaz authorities, who had begun to implement

the state of emergency, deployed militia throughout the Gali district, Georgian armed groups began to operate again and Georgian Interior Ministry troops were deployed along the southern bank of the Inguri River. Georgian Defence Ministry troops were deployed in the two Georgian-controlled pockets on the northern bank of the River, but following a protest by UNOMIG, they were replaced on 3 June by Interior Ministry troops. In addition, new military equipment, such as bridge-layers and bulldozers, appeared in the Senaki bridge compound, just outside the border of the Zugdidi restricted weapons zone.

8. Active consultations are currently under way in Moscow between the personal representatives of the President of Georgia, Mr. Eduard Shevardnadze, and the Abkhaz leader, Mr. Ardzinba, concerning a possible meeting between the two leaders. The Executive Secretary of the CIS, Mr. Berezovsky, is also involved in these negotiations. The proposed meeting would address the current crisis and seek to put the peace process back on track. However, the apparent lack of progress in these consultations is cause for serious concern and underlines the need for intensified efforts by all concerned to overcome existing obstacles.

III. OPERATIONS OF THE UNITED NATIONS OBSERVER MISSION IN GEORGIA

9. As stated above, in order to support the parties' efforts, UNOMIG resumed limited patrolling jointly with the CIS peacekeeping force and representatives of the parties following the signing of the Protocol of 25 May 1998. That patrolling was suspended on 29 May, when the situation appeared to be calming down. Subsequently, however, in light of the renewed increase in tension, UNOMIG was authorized to resume independent, albeit limited, patrolling in order to help deter possible excessive behaviour by the Abkhaz militia and to facilitate the return of those inhabitants of the Gali sector who had fled during the earlier fighting. At present, the military observers patrol in two mine-protected vehicles at all times; patrols take place during the daytime only and on main roads connecting major populated areas; and the security arrangements with the CIS peacekeeping force mentioned in my previous report (see S/1998/375, para. 25) remain in place. The Mission's helicopter is on standby for possible medical evacuation. The countries contributing military observers to UNOMIG have been apprised of these developments. While none of them objected to the decision to resume limited patrolling, several underlined that such resumption should not be interpreted as a return to normalcy.

10. In spite of the precautions taken by the Mission, on 8 June a UNOMIG mine-protected vehicle detonated a mine in the Gali district, injuring a United Nations military observer from the Russian Federation and an interpreter. Two other mine incidents were reported earlier involving the CIS peacekeeping force and an Abkhaz vehicle. The latter incident resulted in the death of six of the vehicle's passengers.

IV. SECURITY ARRANGEMENTS

11. As requested by the Security Council, I instructed my Special Representative, Mr. Liviu Bota, to consult with the parties on the concept of the self-protection unit and on other options, as appropriate, in close cooperation with the group of Friends of the Secretary-General. Having completed his consultations, Mr. Bota has now advised me that the Foreign Minister of Georgia has reiterated his Government's unreserved support for the deployment of such a unit. The Abkhaz leader, Mr. Ardzinba, however, continues to object to such a deployment. In a letter addressed to me on 2 June, he recalled the statement in my last report that most of the attacks on the Abkhaz militia and the CIS peacekeeping force, which have repercussions on the activities of UNOMIG, have been orchestrated by armed groups operating from the Georgian side of the Inguri River (see S/1998/375, para. 47). In Mr. Ardzinba's view, the United Nations "undoubtedly possesses broad possibilities of convincing Georgia to comply strictly with the obligations it has assumed. Only in this way can conditions of security for UNOMIG be guaranteed, since it is precisely the activity of the subversive and terrorist groups that poses a real threat to [the Mission]". Mr. Ardzinba further stated that, for their part, the Abkhaz authorities would guarantee the security of UNOMIG in Abkhaz territory.

12. In the course of the consultations conducted with them, neither of the parties supported the option that UNOMIG be reduced to the minimal possible presence, as envisaged in my report of 11 May (ibid., para. 49), but both reaffirmed their support for the continuation of its presence and activities in accordance with its mandate, as stipulated in resolution 937 (1994) of 21 July 1994. The possibility of strengthening security arrangements with the CIS peacekeeping force, as described in my last report, was not considered by either side.

V. OBSERVATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

13. Bearing in mind the positions of the parties as described above, as well as the situation on the ground and the need to maintain the Mission's presence among the population, and taking into account the fact that the proposed self-protection unit can only be deployed with the consent of the parties, the Council may wish to consider approving a modified version of the second option presented in my report of 11 May (ibid.), which proposes redeploying UNOMIG and resuming operations using mine- and ballistic-protected vehicles. Such a redeployment would take place only in the current limited manner (see para. 9 above). The Mission's strength would be temporarily established at 98 military observers; its protected vehicle fleet would be increased in order to ensure that all the Mission's personnel are protected when on the road; its team bases would remain closed; and the security arrangements mentioned in my previous report would be maintained, including protection by the parties of Mission headquarters and accommodations. Should the Council agree with that recommendation, I will submit as soon as possible, in an addendum to the present report, a statement on the related financial implications. The Council, however, should be aware that while the Secretariat has taken all possible measures to improve the security of the military observers in order to enable the Mission to implement its mandated tasks and to contribute, by its presence,

to the maintenance of peaceful conditions on the ground, the threat posed by mines (see para. 10 above), armed groups and criminal elements will remain serious and real as long as the efforts to move the peace process forward do not bear fruit. For that, both sides will have to demonstrate their commitment to the settlement of the conflict through genuine negotiations and accommodation.

14. I am very much concerned about recent developments in the area. Should the situation escalate any further it will only result in unnecessary human suffering and additional loss of life. I therefore appeal urgently to both sides to settle their disputes at the negotiating table and not by armed confrontation. I sincerely hope that the talks in Moscow will bear fruit and that the proposed meeting between the Georgian President, Mr. Shevardnadze, and the Abkhaz leader, Mr. Ardzinba, will take place soon. For his part, my Special Representative will continue his efforts to help move the Geneva process forward.